

The Night Before

"What if I am wrong and I got

Everything all wrong, then what?"

Est

It's 2:17 a.m. when I realize I've checked the charge on my camera batteries for the fourteenth time.

Three batteries, all at 100%. I don't need three. I don't even need two. But I keep plugging them in, unplugging them, pressing the test button until the little green light burns into my retinas like a warning.

My studio in the apartment is the size of a closet. Gear is spread across every flat surface: lenses lined up like dominoes on the floor, a folded gray backdrop propped against the wall, my light meter sitting on the windowsill where it's been since I bought it three years ago and forgot how to use it without Tui walking me through the settings. The brief for William's shoot is open on my phone, the screen dimmed to half-brightness so it doesn't sear my tired eyes, but I've read it so many times the words are seared into my brain anyway:

William Jakrapatr Kaewpanpong, 23. Oil painter known for emotionally charged abstract portraits. Shoot to capture the artist in his space—intimate, not intrusive. No flash. No sudden movements. Resides in private residence. First author portrait to be taken in over three years.

Intimate, not intrusive.

Those four words have been looping in my head for 48 hours. A mantra, and a threat.

I lean back against the wall and close my eyes. The spiral starts small, as it always does: Did I pack the right neutral density filter? What if the natural light in his apartment is too flat? What if my shutter clicks too loud? Then it unravels, fast, until the technical fears bleed into the ones that live in the hollow of my chest. What if I move too fast when I adjust my lens, and he flinches? What if I ask the wrong question?—slamming the door not just on the shoot, but on the job, on the chance Tui fought so hard to get me? What if I mess this up before I even take a single photo? It's never just the job. It's everything.

It's the way Tui handed me that contract like he was giving me something I deserved, not something he was doing out of pity. It's the way my dad looked at me when he found the photos of boys in my computer, It's the three years I told myself every unpaid shoot was "exposure" instead of desperation. This job isn't just a paycheck. It's proof. Proof that Tui wasn't wrong to believe in me. Proof that I'm not

the failure my dad said I was. Proof that I can do something more than just scrape by. If I mess this up, I don't just lose the job. I lose that proof. I lose the one thing that makes me feel like I'm not still that 18-year-old kid with a broken camera and nowhere to go.

I reach for my phone and scroll through William's portfolio again, even though I've memorized every brushstroke. The paintings of are soft, luminous—But there are others, too: small, dark sketches tucked at the bottom of the gallery, barely labeled. I'm supposed to capture that. The grief. The quiet. The way he turns pain into art. But what if I don't? What happens if he doesn't see it?

How do you photograph someone who doesn't want to be seen... but needs to be?

Maybe I should bring natural light. Maybe not. Maybe shadows are good. Maybe they're cruel. What if he hates me? What if he walks out? What if I say the wrong thing? What if I don't ask and he thinks I don't care?

I picked up my phone. I searched for Tui's name. My thumb hovered over the call.

I couldn't go back so soon, begging for comfort. It wasn't fair. Tui was also trying to learn to need. I had to stop being the one who always needed help.

I open my text thread with Tui. The last message I sent him was 48 hours ago. He never replied.

I type: I'm scared I'll mess this up.

Delete.

I type: Can you walk me through the lighting setup one more time?

Delete.

I type: I don't know if I can do this.

Delete.

I don't want to be that kid again. The one who needs Tui to fix everything. The one who can't stand on his own two feet.

The floor creaks when I shift to reach for my old camera bag. Something small and crumpled falls out of the side pocket. It's a photo. The first one I ever took of Tui.

We were 19. He was sitting on the steps of the dorm, His hair was longer then, and he had a smudge of ink on his cheek, like he'd wiped it there without thinking. I took the shot when he wasn't looking—afraid if I asked, he'd say no. On the back, in Tui's messy, slanted handwriting: You see the things no one else does. Don't ever stop.

I forgot he wrote that. Forgot he kept the photo, that he slipped it into my bag when

I was packing to move out of the dorm after graduation.

My phone buzzes.

It's Tui.

The message is short, no frills, like he knew I'd be up:

Don't overthink the shoot. He's not a subject. He's a person. And you see people better than anyone I know.

I stare at the screen until my eyes burn. I don't reply. I don't have to.

I still don't sleep. Not for long. But when I close my eyes, I don't see the list of things that could go wrong. I see Tui, sitting on those dorm steps, ink on his cheek. I see people. Not subjects. Not jobs. People.

I doze off, The last thing I smell is the faint, familiar scent of instant coffee.

Then the world shifts. The dream came like a storm—sudden, vivid, impossible to wake from.

He was back in the dorm. Not his own room, but Tui's—the one with the peeling paint and the window that never shut all the way. Rain tapped against the glass like fingers testing the lock. The air smelled of damp concrete and instant coffee, the kind they drank when they couldn't afford anything else. Tui sat on the edge of his bed, shoulders hunched, face half-hidden in shadow. He wasn't laughing. Wasn't smiling. Wasn't the warm, untouchable force Est had come to rely on.

He looked young.

The hum of my laptop fades into the rattle of an old ceiling fan, the kind that moved air but never cooled anything. The walls narrow. The light turns harsh, fluorescent, flickering every few seconds like it's gasping for life. I'm on the floor of our old dorm room, 19 again, my back pressed to the edge of Tui's bed. The sheets are the faded batik his mom sent from the village, frayed at the corners where he'd tugged at them when he couldn't sleep.

Tui is sitting next to me, legs drawn up to his chest, a stolen cigarette between his fingers. He coughs when he inhales—he never liked smoking, even back then; he only did it when he was trying to say something he couldn't bear to speak sober.

We hadn't said a word in an hour. We walked back from the campus library at midnight, and Tui stopped dead in his tracks in the hallway, staring at a man leaning against the wall: a middle-aged man from the village, someone Tui had once mentioned, in passing, as the reason he'd applied for the scholarship. The man left before we could catch up with him. Tui hadn't spoken since.

Now he exhales a thin cloud of smoke, and says, quiet enough that I almost miss it:

"My art teacher in high school." Tui's voice is monotonous, empty. As if he were reading from a textbook he memorized but never understood. "She noticed I was drawing in the margins of my notebooks. She gave me paper. Pencils. She said I had a good eye for drawing." He pauses. The fan rattles louder. Somewhere down the hall, a radio plays a old Thai ballad, tinny and sad. And he was crying—not loudly, not dramatically—but in that quiet, broken way that meant he'd been holding it in.

Est didn't remember walking into the room. Didn't remember sitting beside him. But there he was, close enough to see the tremor in his hands. Tui didn't look at him. Just stared at the floor.

"I was 16. She was 38. She said I was mature for my age. She said I wasn't like other kids."

My throat goes tight. I'm 19 here, in the dream—still raw from being kicked out, still too scared to ask for help, still convinced Tui was the strong one, the one who never broke. I don't know what to say. I just sit there, and listen.

"She invited me to her house all the time. Her husband was away a lot for work. I thought... I thought she loved me. I thought I loved her." Tui's fingers shake when he brings the cigarette to his lips. He drops ash on the floor. Doesn't bother to brush it off.

"One night, her husband came home early. He yelled. He called me a child. He called her a pervert. I lied. I said I was only there to borrow books. I defended her. Even when the neighbors came to see." The cigarette burns down to his fingers. He doesn't flinch.

"The whole town knew, by the end of the week. My mom cried. She didn't say anything, but she didn't have to. I left for university a month early. I never went back." He goes quiet. For a long time, the only sound is the fan. Then he says, so soft it's almost a whisper: "I thought it was love. For two years, I thought it was love. Then I got here. I met you. I realized...16 isn't old enough to choose. Not when the other person has all the power."

In the dream, I am both 19 and 24. I am the boy who sat there frozen, too stupid and too scared to reach out, and the man who now understands every sharp, quiet horror of what Tui is saying. I want to reach across the space between us, want to take his hand, want to say It wasn't your fault. You didn't do anything wrong. But 19-year-old me can only manage one thing. I hold out my hand, palm up, between us. Tui stares at it for a second. Then he sets the cigarette down in an empty instant noodle cup, and laces his fingers through mine. His hand is cold. Trembling. I don't say anything. He doesn't either. We just sit there, in the dark, holding on.

"I never told anyone else." Tui says, after what feels like forever. "Not even my

mother. Let the people think what they wanted, I didn't want to admit it."

"I won't tell anyone," I say. My voice is thick. "I'll keep it for you." Tui squeezes my hand. Once.

Then the dream changes. The bedroom fades away. The fan's rattle becomes fan becomes the faint sound of the city. The sheets transform into my own.

He remembered things now—little things Tui had said over the years, offhand, buried in laughter or distraction:

"I used to think an adult loving you meant you were safe."

"Some mentors cross lines and call it inspiration."

"I left my hometown fast. People talk too much."

When the alarm goes off at 6 a.m., I get up. I make coffee—too strong, just the way I like it.

Ink & Ashes – Morning

He didn't remember the walk. He was just suddenly there, standing in the pool of dim yellow light from the streetlamp outside Ink & Ashes, his heart hammering a frantic rhythm against his ribs. The dream clung to him like a second skin—the rattle of the fan, the smell of cheap cigarettes and mildew, the devastating flatness in Tui's voice. I was 17. He was 38. The words were a cold stone in his gut. He thought so much about his own past that he began to forget the past of others.

Tui found him sitting on the studio steps, knees drawn to his chest, camera bag at his side like a shield. "You're early." Tui said, unlocking the door.

"I can't sleep."

Tui paused. Looked at him. "You're overthinking it."

Est nodded, voice tight. "I keep imagining it going wrong. Him standing there, looking at me like I'm some stranger invading his space. Me fumbling with the lights. Saying something stupid. Making him regret saying yes."

Tui sat beside him, close enough that their shoulders touched. A quiet comfort. Tui pulled out his phone, scrolled through his gallery, and handed it to Est.

There it was—a photo from months ago. Est had taken it without thinking: an old man selling lotus flowers by the river, hands gnarled, eyes closed as sunlight broke through the trees. The image wasn't posed. Wasn't dramatic. Just real. Quiet. Full of dignity.

"He looked at that." Tui said. "and said, 'He sees people.' Not poses. Not costumes.

Not stories made up for the camera. People.”

Est swallowed. “I just... took a picture.”

That’s what you do. You don’t force it. You don’t perform it. You wait. You watch. You let the moment come to you.” Tui said gently.

Est looked down at his hands. “What if he doesn’t want to be seen?”

“Then you don’t push.” Tui said. “You sit. You breathe. You say. ‘We can stop anytime.’ And you mean it.”

Est exhaled, long and shaky. “I don’t want to mess this up.”

“You won’t.” Tui said. “Because you’re not going in there to prove anything. You’re going in there to witness. To honor. That’s all anyone ever needs from a photographer.”

Est closed his eyes. Breathed.

When he opened them, Tui was watching him—not fixing, not rushing, just there.

“Thank you.” Est whispered.

Tui smiled. Small. Real. “You’ve got this.”

We don’t talk. Not for a long time. At some point, Tui leans his head on my shoulder.

“Couldn’t sleep?” Tui finally asked, his voice a gravelly whisper.

“No.” Est said. Then, carefully, he added. “Remembered some things. From the dorm.”

Tui went very still. “Est...”

“Why are you here?” Tui whispered, the question full of genuine, aching bewilderment. “After everything... after how I’ve pushed you away... why?”

Est held his gaze. “Because you once held my pieces when I was falling apart. And I told you I’d keep yours safe for you. I meant it.”

“I’m sorry.”

“it’s Okay, I’m sorry too. I think having the job put me in a strange place.”

He rubbed at his face with one hand. “You have a shoot today.”

“Yeah.” William. The portfolio. The job I still wasn’t entirely convinced I deserved.

Somehow, after the night, it felt smaller. Not unimportant—just... less like life or death.

Tui pushed himself to his feet, wincing as his back cracked. “We need caffeine.” He glanced at me over his shoulder. For a moment, something indecipherable flashed in his eyes; then he smiled, a wry smile. “If I stay here any longer, I’ll start rewriting my entire life in my head. Better to do it with coffee.”

“So..” Tui said, hands in his pockets. “first time today.”

“Yeah.” My stomach did a small, nervous flip. “First time he’s seeing me, too.”

“He said yes to the home shoot. That’s already huge.” Tui nudged me lightly with his elbow. “He trusts the idea, if not the person. You can work with that.”

I huffed out a breath. “I keep thinking about all the ways I could screw it up.”

“That’s just your anxiety trying to prove it’s doing its job,” he said. “Anxiety is very proud of itself.”

I laughed, short and surprised. Some of the tightness in my chest loosened. “What about you?” I asked, before I could talk myself out of it. “You okay?”

He didn’t deflect immediately. He just looked straight ahead, watching the pavement pass under our feet. “Not really.” he said finally. “But I’m... less not-okay than I was a few hours ago.”

I swallowed. “Because of...?”

“You showing up.” he said simply.

“If you ever want to... talk more.” I said, stumbling a little over the offer. “About the town. About... anything. You don’t have to wait until it turns up in my dreams.”

His eyes widened, just for a second, then softened. “Maybe next time.” he said. “We can do it before I break down in your arms.”

I smiled, crooked and small. “I don’t mind that part.”

“Oh?” His mouth curved. “You enjoy watching me cry?”

“I enjoy watching you be real.” I corrected. “Even if it’s messy.”

He stepped aside, letting me pass. As I did, his fingers brushed my wrist. A small, deliberate touch. “Text me when you’re done.”

“That’s... clingy.” I said, but my heart lurched in my chest.

“Yeah, well.” he shrugged. “I’m working on letting people help me. I figure annoying

them with updates is part of the process.”

I walked backward for a few steps, grinning despite myself. “Fine. I’ll text. Try not to adopt three more stray artists while I’m gone.”

“No promises.” he called after me.

The fear came back, a familiar flutter in my stomach. But under it, threaded through it, was something steadier. A line, running from my chest back to the studio, back to a dorm room with a rattling fan and a boy who had finally, finally let someone hold his hand without apologizing for it. I adjusted the camera strap on my shoulder and took a deep breath. I wasn’t just walking toward a job. I was walking forward—with him.